



Beauty's Enigma - Donyale Luna - The First Black Supermodel

Ben Arogundade

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They called her 'the reincarnation of Nefertiti,' and 'a girl of staggering beauty and magnetism.' She was Donyale Luna, the startling, owl-like beauty who crashed through fashion's apartheid system on the back of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, becoming the world's first black supermodel, and the first to grace the covers of both 'Harper's Bazaar' and 'Vogue'.

From a troubled upbringing in Detroit in which her mother shot dead her abusive father, the young beauty managed to escape her past after she was spotted on the street by a photographer, and invited to New York. 'They went wild,' said Luna of the fashion industry's immediate reaction to her. She was 5'11, 118-pounds, flat-chested and X-ray skinny, with no backside and no breasts. Her legs were as stilt-like as a Giacometti sculpture, her fingers extended and spidery. She had caramel-coloured skin, almond-shaped eyes, full lips and an oval-shaped face which, in certain poses, retained a certain owl-ish surprise, as if she'd just been pinched from behind. She didn't fit the aesthetic stereotype for what many thought of as black beauty. Her look was otherworldly, plain and simple.

She rose quickly to the top of the supermodel stratosphere. She worked with Salvador Dali, Federico Fellini, Andy Warhol, David Bailey, Helmut Newton and Richard Avedon, and named Miles Davis, James Earl Jones and Sammy Davis Jr. amongst her friends.

But ultimately her career was cut tragically short, as she became a casualty of the temptations of the modelling scene, dying from a drug overdose in 1979, at the age of 32.

This new biography by Ben Arogundade, author of 'Black Beauty', details her amazing life story in all its dramatic glory.

(Word count - 8000)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Arogundade is a London-based writer and creative director of illustrated books. He originally trained as an architect before diversifying into graphic design and print journalism. In 1996 he launched 'Extract', a cult style magazine about the lives of non-celebrities. In 2000 he wrote his first book, 'Black Beauty' — an exploration of society's historical perceptions of the black image — which later became the subject of a three-part BBC documentary. Following this he worked as a voice-over artist before becoming creative director at Gloria Books, publishers of luxury collectables. In 2010 he launched his own publishing imprint, Arogundade Books.

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